

Compatibility Determination (Draft)

Use: Implement Fort Niobrara NWR River Recreation Management Plan. Recreational floating will be permitted on a portion of the Niobrara River that flow through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

Refuge Name: Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Executive Order 1461 on January 11, 1912
Executive Order 1642, on November 14, 1912
Executive Order 3256, on March 31, 1920
Executive Order 7301, on February 21, 1936

Purposes for which the Refuge was established:

Executive Order 1461,... “preserve and breeding ground for native birds”.

Executive Order 1642, set aside additional lands as the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve for the preservation of bison and elk herds representative of those that once roamed the Great Plains.

Executive Orders 3256 and 7301, various purposes including roost sites for sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens, migratory bird food sites, and pronghorn antelope management.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Description of Proposed Use: The Niobrara River, including that portion on the Refuge, is part of the Wild and Scenic River System. The Niobrara River downstream of the launch area to the Refuge boundary is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The River Recreation Management Plan would allow up to 20,300 people to float a portion of the Niobrara River on the Refuge each year. River floating on the Refuge, approximately 5 miles, would be allowed downstream from Cornell Dam only. The four mile stretch of river on the Refuge above Cornell Dam would remain closed to public use, allowing that area to be a sanctuary for wildlife. Specific management strategies would be implemented to ensure opportunities for Refuge floaters to experience a quality, wildlife-dependent visit. Float trips are by non-motorized vessels; canoes, kayaks and tubes and trips range in duration from 2 to 4 hours depending on vessel type and water level. Existing launch area facilities/access would be maintained.

Availability of Resources: Sufficient resources are available to administer river recreational use at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge.

Anticipated Impacts of Use:

- River recreation, as planned, is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species. The primary use period for bald eagles on the Refuge is October through April which is when very little river recreational use takes place. Whooping cranes, least terns, and piping plovers would not be impacted by any of the alternatives, since the area they inhabit on the Refuge is found above Cornell Dam which is closed to recreational use
- Visitor use results in disturbance to wildlife on the Refuge. Researchers on the Refuge found no clear effects of recreational disturbance on songbirds breeding on the Refuge, however, there was negative behavioral effect on waterbirds. Birds roosting or feeding in the River are the most susceptible to disturbance and include herons, ducks, and shorebirds. Only small numbers of these birds use that part of the River most frequented by canoers and tubers. The portion of the River above Cornell Dam is used more by these groups of birds and is closed to all public use as a sanctuary to wildlife.
- Disturbance to soil and vegetation is, at present, minor. River recreation, as planned, will continue to address and minimize this affect. Most visitors do not get out of their canoe or off their tube except on sandbars. Two developed sites, Fort Falls Trail and the Niobrara Wilderness Access, are only lightly used and disturbance is on or adjacent to the foot path.
- Specific management strategies, as identified in the River Management Plan, would be implemented to ensure opportunities for Refuge floaters to experience a quality wildlife-dependent visit and opportunities for solitude.

Public Review and Comment: Notifications of the public scoping meeting, research summaries, and planning document availability were distributed through media press releases. A letter with a series of questions was sent to outfitters to gain perspective of the outfitting business, as it relates to the Refuge and development of the River Recreation Management Plan. An open house was held, inviting the public and partners to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns. In addition to comments received during the open house, twenty-one pieces of correspondence were received during the public scoping period. The plan will be made available to the public for a 60-day comment period. An open house will be hosted by the Refuge staff approximately 30 days into the comment period, for the public and partners to discuss the draft document. A copy of the final plan will be provided to all interested parties.

Determination:

This use is compatible_____

This use is *not compatible*_____

The following stipulations are required to ensure compatibility:

- Sufficient resources must be available from Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge to administer the river recreational management plan provisions.
- The draft Fort Niobrara NWR River Recreation Management Plan is completed and approved by the Service.

Justification: Based upon the impacts presented, it is determined that River recreation within the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which this Refuge was established. The River Recreation Management Plan, as prepared, has measured these impacts and adjusted visitation to meet the compatibility standards of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Visitors using the River come to observe wildlife and wildlands. Wildlife observation is one of the priority uses listed in the National Wildlife Improvement Act and is one of the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Signature: Refuge Manager: _____
Signature and date

Concurrence: Refuge Supervisor: _____
Signature and date

Regional Chief: _____
Signature and date

Mandatory 10-or15-year reevaluation Date: _____